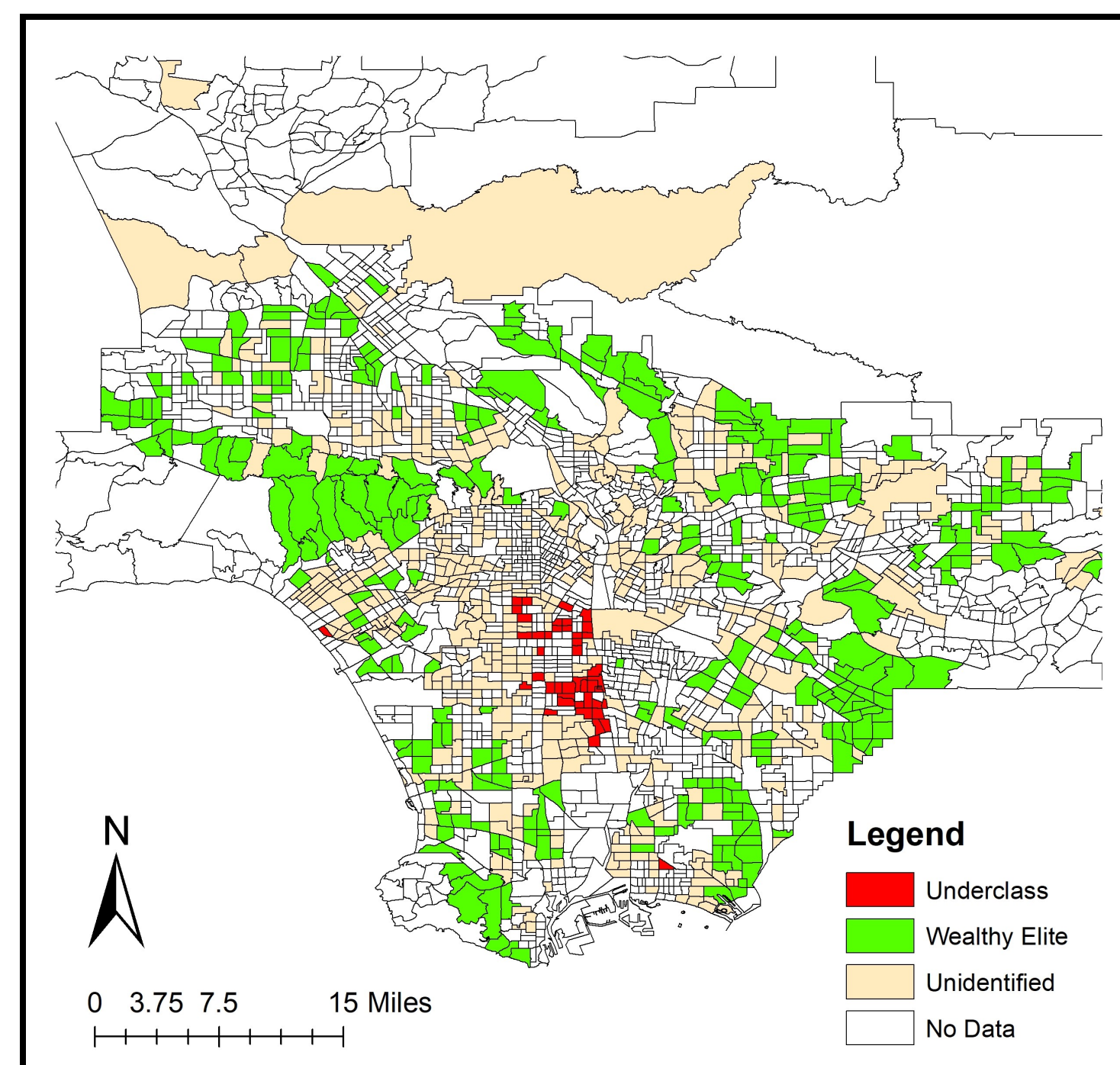


Living in La La Land

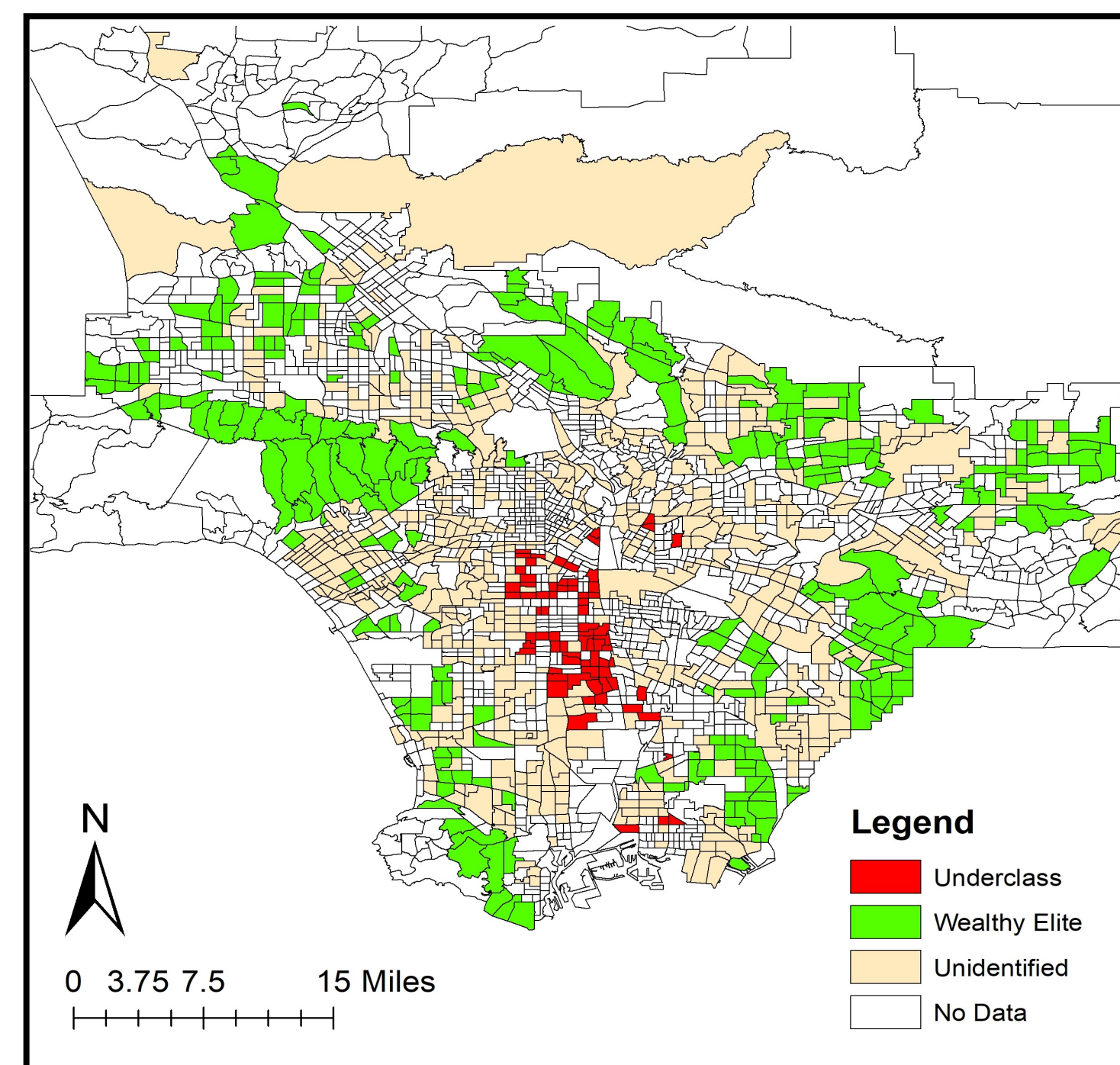
Two Jarring Experiences in Los Angeles County

The Wealthy Elite and the Underclass: 1970s—2000s

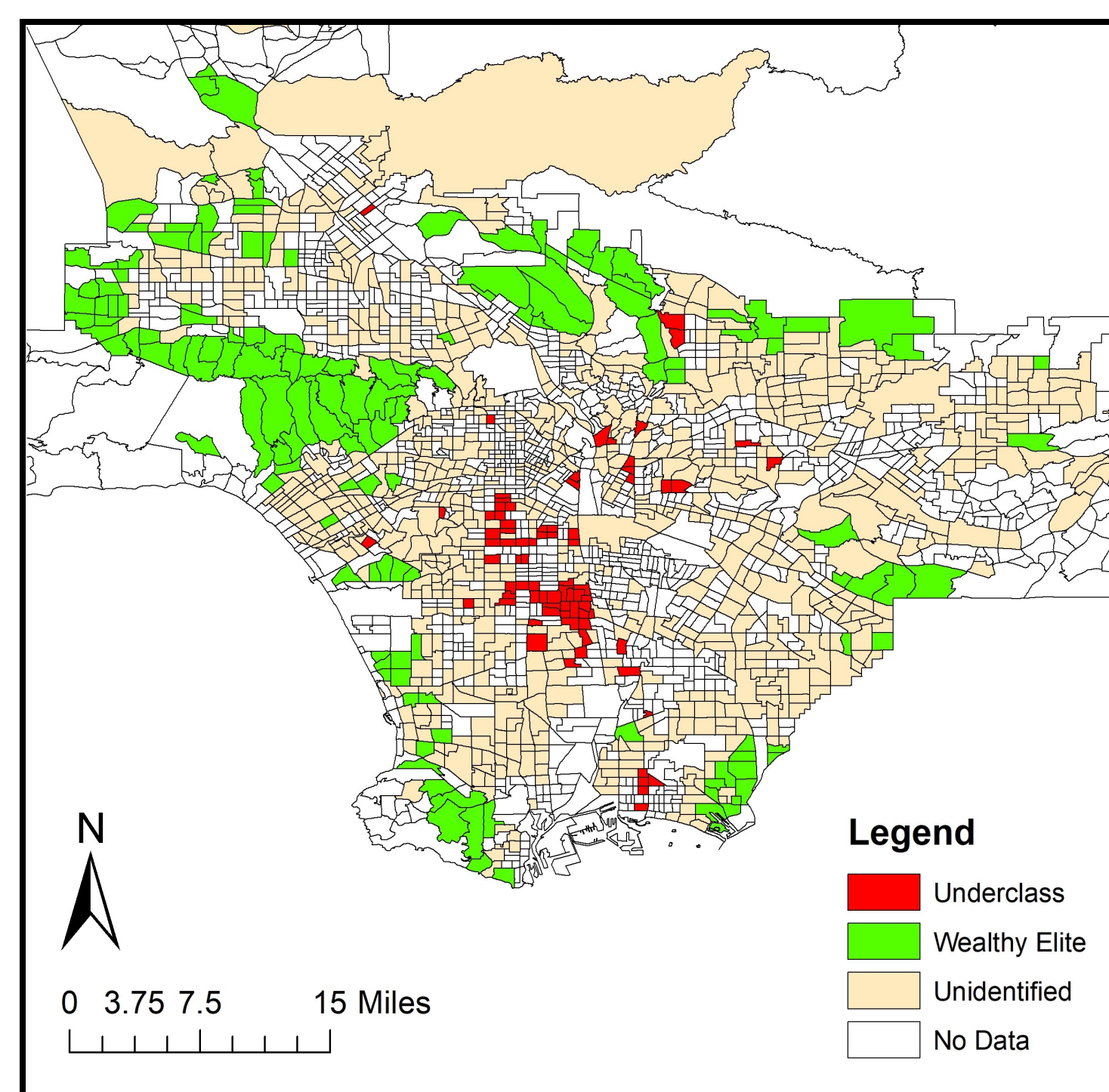
1970



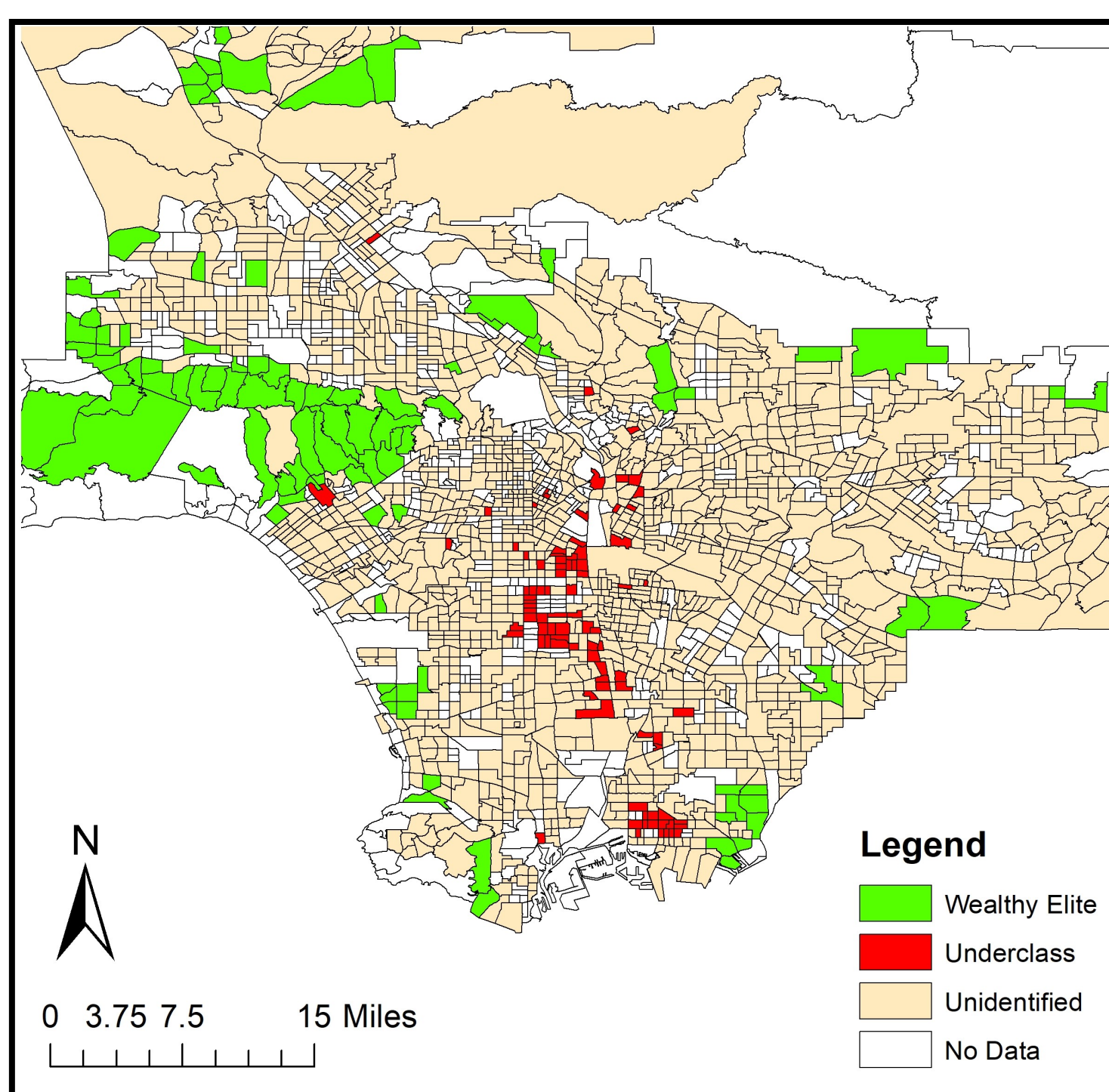
1980



1990



2000



Data and Sources

Select Los Angeles County Census Tract 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 data. Retrieved from Social Explorer
Los Angeles County Boundary and Tracts. Retrieved from LA County
California State Census tracts. Retrieved from Census TIGER data

Wilson, William J. *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
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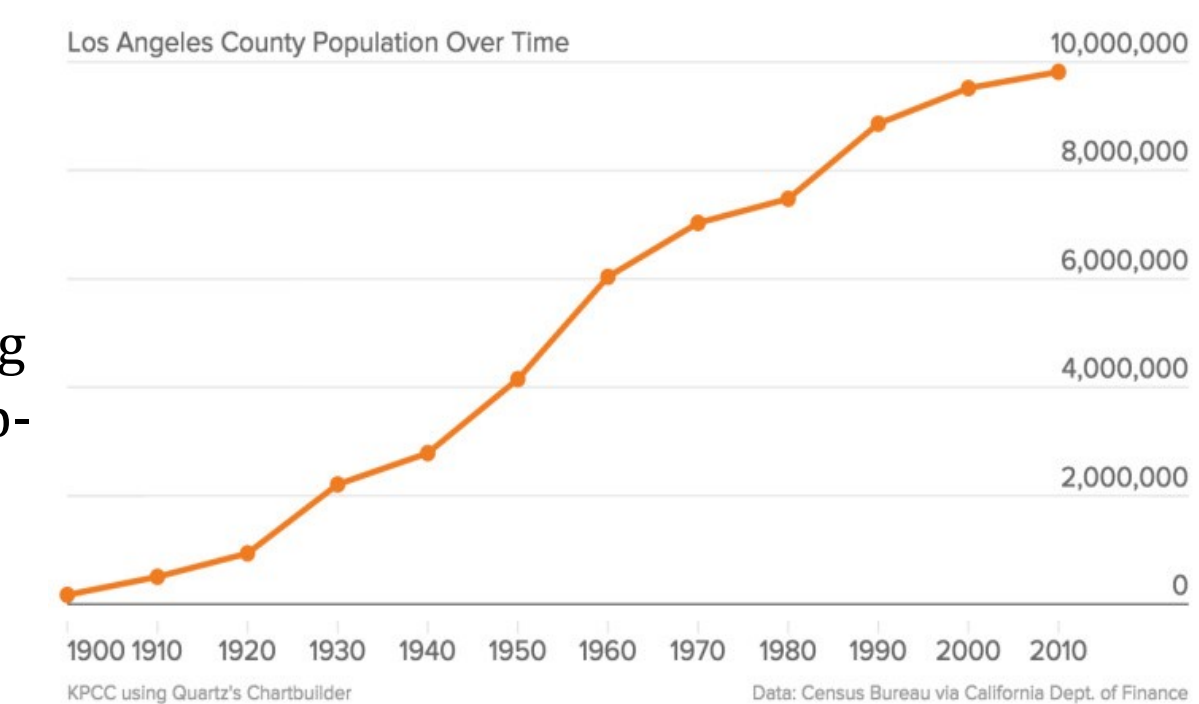
Abstract



Los Angeles County is the highest populated county in the country and also one of the largest. It is also plagued with severe income inequality and sprawling gentrification. Approximately 18% of the population lives in poverty; however, Los Angeles County also holds the highest count of millionaires in the nation. The underclass is a sociological concept popularized by William Wilson in the late 1990s. The underclass refers to the lowest rung of the bottom economic class. This group is distinct from the broader lower class in that they are characterized by hyper-segregation which leaves them socially isolated and disadvantaged politically and economically (Wilson).

This typically translates to the group stricken with long-term unemployment and poverty. Conversely to the underclass, the wealthy have also settled into Los Angeles. The second part of this project is identifying the portions of the population associated with affluence. Rather than just look at income data, the project also looks at indicators of long-term wealth including college-education and homeownership.

This project seeks to explore how these groups have moved between the 1970s and 2000. Los Angeles is constantly growing and the race-class dynamics are constantly playing out across the landscape. How have these populations moved over time and how do they seem to relate to each other?



Methodology

Steps

1. Format Excel data to correct FIPS number inconsistencies between Social Explorer data and the Census tract TIGER data. Conduct any necessary data manipulation, including calculating percentages and rearranging columns. Research relevant yearly data for national average comparison.
2. Join the Census data for underclass characteristics with the Census tract file and export the data. This results in a layer consisting only of Census tracts with corresponding data for that year.
3. Conduct an attribute query in the new layer of Census tracts with above average levels of people of color, unemployment, poverty, and public assistance recipients. The selected tracts were exported and symbolized to represent the underclass.
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 with Census data for elite characteristics. The resulting layer represents Census tracts with above average rates of white people, college education, homeownership, and above median incomes.

There were several sources of error for this project. Census tracts were assumed to be a small enough unit to categorize the neighborhoods within them. However, this assumes that there is an even distribution of people within the tract. Additionally, in order to determine if a given population's data was significant, it was compared to national averages. For example, the national poverty rate was approximately 13% in 1990, therefore, one attribute that was queried was if a given Census tract reported over 13% people in poverty. This does not account for the state or county poverty levels, which can be significantly different considering Los Angeles County is one of the most expensive cities to live in. The list of attributes considered in this project is not exhaustive or exact in terms of identifying certain classes of people. For example, race was used as a factor in this project—with high white populations being queried as an attribute for the wealthy. This removes populations of poor concentrated white people from the underclass.

Results

The results suggest that the underclass occupy a small portion south of Downtown Los Angeles. These tracts are particularly located in the cities of Westmont, Willowbrook, and Compton. There is some variation between these tracts from decade to decade, however, the tracts identified in the 70s appear to be consistent. In the 80s, the underclass seems to cover a solid portion of the city. However, in just one decade it seems the population has begun to distribute – with several lone tracts now arising in the North. This may be the result of large-scale urban renewal efforts that begin in downtown for the 1984 Olympics and the war on drugs stemming from the crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s. Between the 1990s and 2000s, the population becomes more scattered – likely due to large scale gentrification.

Meanwhile, it is immediately discernable that there are many more tracts dominated by white people that show long-term signs of wealth and power i.e. home ownership and college education. Also notable is the distribution of these tracts. While the underclass are primarily clustered in South LA, the upper class dominate in tracts that encircle all of the city, particularly in the 70s and 80s. They mostly appear to be outside of downtown, focused in the suburbs to the North and East. There are also clusters farther in the South but to less extent. As the decades pass, this population becomes even further clustered to the North near Santa Monica Mountains, Encino, and Beverly Hills. The disappearance of this demographic may have disappeared from the South and East due to increases in Asian and Latinx populations moving into these once white-dominated tracts.

Conclusions

Generally, the maps seem to suggest that there has not been much movement of these populations in the last 40 years. There is very little change between the 1970s and the 2000s. In some places these populations are geographically far apart with a large buffer of diverse populations between them. However, in other populations like in Long Beach, the underclass and the elites are practically neighbors. At this point, the project does not seem to suggest that these populations are directly impacting each other with their movement.

This project illuminates several factors that maybe be relevant for future policymaking. This provides insights to the lives of the people within these areas. In such highly clustered areas, these statistics not only indicate life circumstances, but they also show how real communities and networks of people may be forming. This can also be a way of understanding how these communities interact with each other. It may also provide clues as to how and why the underclass has become so concentrated. This project can be the beginning of strategies to direct resources to these areas to provide economic relief and opportunity. There is room for much more growth to involve more attributes and other measures that may more realistically capture the predicament of these communities and begin to assess how change can be made.

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